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Gestural translations from within the (post)digital: a Flusserian analysis of phonic gestures

Introduction: the developing gestural language

In the 2006 essay "What is an apparatus?", philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes how the "gestures … of individuals have been reshaped from top to toe" (2006: 15-16) by the mobile phone. The following year multinational technology company Apple announced the iPhone. This novel apparatus was presented in a keynote by Apple co-founder Steve Jobs who exhibited a proliferation of dexterous hand movements across an expansive touchscreen. This device, and its myriad versions, has proliferated to seeming ubiquity. With it, the top-to-toe reshaping of individuals through their gestures and behaviours first mentioned by Agamben has diffused itself through the widespread adoption of this particular mobile phone form factor.[1]

Ostensibly, a new gestural language has been developing alongside the development of the mobile phone. The gestural language between the individual and their device has increased in intensity over the past decade and this intensity has become so pronounced and so intense it has led some to define a new gestural paradigm. For instance, philosopher Michel Serres argued that these novel human beings "no longer have the same body or the same behaviour" (2012: 3). He refers to these new people as "thumbelinas" (*petite poucette*) with the touching and tapping thumb being the metonymic signifier of their entire person. It is evident that they speak a developing gestural language; living in a time of reshaped gesturality.

How can this new gestural language be theorised? The contemporary gestural language is commonly expressed through a selection of verbs. The phone has a "touch" screen, it can "scroll" and "swipe", one can "pinch-to-zoom" or "tap-to-select", and so on. These words—touching, scrolling, swiping, and pinching—are some examples of the types of Maussian bodily techniques[2] underpinning this new gestural language of mobile phone use. However, an entire dimension of

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[1] The form factor of the mobile device is the arrangement of major components define it. The iPhone popularised what is referred to as the "slate" form factor recognisable by a large, touchscreen, and rectangular shape (as seen in the iPhone or Samsung Galaxy models). This is form factor is generically referred to as a "smartphone" and is undoubtedly the most ubiquitous form factor available. Other, older, mobile phone form factors include the "bar" where the front screen is accompanied by a manual keyboard (such as the Nokia 3310) or the "flip" or "clamshell" (such as the Motorola Razr) where the screen and keyboard fold across a hinge.

[2] Marcel Mauss was a sociologist who described how our ways of moving are learned techniques (see Mauss 1973).

this language has seemingly been ignored within several prevailing theories. As Vilém Flusser reminds us, a language is not only "names and verbs" that act like building blocks of phrases; but for a language to function effectively, it needs a "mortar" to fix these building blocks together (2016: 129). If these verbs are the building blocks, the mortar needs comprehension when contending with this gestural language. Such mortar-gestures are not the prominent verbs of swiping, scrolling, tapping and pinching; rather, they are those that allow individuals to "live" with their device. These gestures are transformative; those movements that precede and proceed such verbiage to allow for a gestural apparatus to situate an individual within its auspice as subject.

Acknowledging these gestures requires that prevailing "verb-centric" theories of gesture are adapted. This research purports that it is through Flusser's work where such an adaptation can arguably find its beginnings, and will demonstrate how Flusser's writing on gesture is invaluable when attempting to conceptualise this phonic gestural language.[3] However, while Flusser's metaphor of language (as brick and mortar) allows for added complexity, it is argued that a complete "vocabulary" (or taxonomy) of these gestures is difficult to come by, and existing attempts to do so results in the creation of abstract technical images of the body. This raises some central methodological issues in understanding gesture today. It is forwarded that Flusser's theorising around gesture offers assistance when navigating these predicaments as through his theorising gestures can be understood not only as a series of words and phrases—"bricks and mortar"—but rather as an embodied process of *translation*.

Through the hands and the body, something is being translated in these gestures: intentionally or not. It is argued that through Flusser's gestural heuristic these phonic gestures are shown to translate what can be described as a *postdigital* condition. Through Flusser's work on gesture contemporary gestural languages be conceptualised as a heuristic that can be used to engage with problems of the postdigital. That is to say, a method of understanding the movements of the body now that, on the one hand, the digital revolution is over, while, on the other, the digital is more pervasive than ever (specific definitions of the postdigital will be presented in turn).

Practically this paper steps through three sections. First, it examines prevailing attempts to understand this new gestural language by paying close attention to the variety of taxonomies that have been developed to illustrate these movements of the body. A taxonomy being a method of naming, describing and classifying these movements. Two modes of taxonomy will be investigated: the dictionary, firstly, and abstract notation, secondly. Once several instances of such taxonomies

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[3] A brief note on the distinction between "phone" and "phonic". The term "phone" refers to the formal, ontic phone-object, while "phonic" accounts for the more general phenomena that occur in relation to or as an effect of a phone (i.e. a phonic gesture).

are provided, it is argued that what is created in each instance is an array of technical images (mosaics of dots and dashes created via apparatus). Second, these taxonomies are problematised as such, and this problem is navigated through Flusser's work on gesture where it is argued that the witnessing and situating of gesture restores it to the position of phenomena. The research then demonstrates how this provides a methodological foundation through which postdigital phonic gestures can be investigated as a mode of translation. Thirdly, to conclude this paper, a close gestural reading of Luke Collins's short film, *Swiped* (2019), is presented to evidence these claims.

Gesture

While gesture—initially—was perhaps the progeny of linguistics, it has found fosterage in many other disciplines. Recently, the rise of gestural interfaces (such as the mobile phone) has compacted interest surrounding gesture and this interest has irrupted exponentially in wider disciplines such as human-computer interaction (HCI). This surge of interest was noted in a special edition of the journal *Apparatus, Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe*, contending that the concept of gesture has become "a convenient catch-all concept in a wide range of interdisciplinary discussions that probe the expressive acts of the body from [a variety of] … standpoints" (Olenia and Schlzki 2017: 1). This has resulted in some particular methodological problems, such as the twofold challenge of navigating the "encumbrance of utterances leading to gesticulation … and the methodological problem of… adequately referencing all nuances of the bodily act" (2017: 2).

To navigate such methodological difficulties various theories, frameworks, and capacities have been developed in an attempt to ameliorate methods of understanding gesture; with one prominent method being the development of *gestural taxonomies*. While the taxonomising of gesture is by no means a new development,[4] there has been the development of new modes of such records alongside the adoption of pre-existing ones (such as Labanotation, discussed below). Generally, these taxonomies take one of two forms. The first being the gestural dictionary where a specific movement is provided with either meaning or a function. The second is gestural notation which dissects a bodily movement into a more abstract technical notation (similar to how the harmonic style of 18th century European musicians is notated with clefs, breves, and crotchets). While both dictionaries and notations apparently account for the methodological challenge of the symbolic—

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[4] Ann Hutchinson Guest's book, *Labanotation*, provides a succinct and rigorous history of gestural notations. Focusing on dance, Guest contends the scholars "believe that ancient Egyptians made use of hieroglyphs to record their dances and that the Romans employed methods of notation for 2 salutary gestures" (2005: 1). Another valuable reference on the history of gestural taxonomies is found in the introduction of François Caradec's *Dictionary of Gestures*, although this reference is not as comprehensive. A complete history of gestural notations is way beyond the scope of this paper but suffice to say that such notations have been developed in Western Europe since the second half of the fifteenth century in the very least (Guest 2005: 1).

the encumbrance of utterances—and biomechanical—the nuances of the bodily act—there is still a pervasive discourse that promotes the biomechanical over the symbolic found in the repeated search of "natural" gestures at the heart of disciplines such as HCI. Take for example the perspicacious thinking by Nicholas Negroponte who wished to remove the "steps" in input between the user and their digital interface (TED 2008): "First of all, you've got to find the mouse... Then you find the mouse, and you're going to have to wiggle it a little bit to see where the cursor is on the screen. And then when you finally see where it is, then you've got to move it to get the cursor over there, and then—"Bang"—you've got to hit a button or do whatever. That's four separate steps versus typing and then touching and typing and just doing it all in one motion—or one-and-a-half, depending on how you want to count."

The metaphor of the various steps defines the distance between the user and the device. Therefore, the fewer steps between the individual and the device the more "natural" the gestures. Negroponte's principal point is that "people don't realize how important [it] is… not having to pick up your fingers to use them" (TED 2008). In not having to collect fingers the gestures are argued to be biomechanical and therefore not symbolic movements, but pure interaction.

This attitude towards gestural design is what inevitably led to the development of the iPhone. Jobs is quoted as saying: "God gave us ten styluses… [let's] not invent another" (Isaacson 2011: 661) referring to the finger. During the launch of the iPhone, he sees the lack of stylus as a triumph and makes a point of mentioning it to the crowd. As he orates: "[We have a] giant screen: but how are we going to communicate to this? We don't want to carry around a mouse. So what are we going to do? Oh, a stylus, right, we're going to use a stylus? No! Who wants a stylus? You have to get them and put them away. You lose them. Yuck! Nobody wants a stylus. We're going to use the best pointing device in the world. We're going to use a pointing device we're all born with. We're born with ten of them. We're going to use our fingers".

The above statements by Negroponte and Jobs seem to predicate the role of the body within gestural interfaces and thus seemingly ignore the ever-present symbolic aspects of these movements. It assumes that if these gestures are natural, they are not learned or performed. Rather gestures are the way they should be: exclusively of the body. This prevalent attitude towards gestures led to how gestures have come to be taxonomised today.

Consequently, the move towards natural bodily interactions in gestural thinking resulted in a complete cavalcade of notations, taxonomies, palettes and gestural vocabularies illustrating how the movements of the body were understood in terms of the device. With this, new knowledges have been produced in the forms of various taxonomies that account for these "natural" movements. While gesture is seemingly a symbolic movement as Flusser would partially define it, within the realm of gestural interactions the symbolic is by and largely disregarded in favour of what is

ostensibly a "new digital Cartesianism"[5] that has pervaded various methodologies for thinking around interaction; one which privileges the body's role in these movements.

What this ultimately results in is the body becoming abstract as it is reduced to nothing but functionality; through this abstraction the body becomes nothing but technical image: not an image created by apparatus as Flusser wrote, but rather the body is envisioned as an image created *for* the apparatus. Below dictionaries and notations are presented to illustrate this.

Gestural taxonomies: dictionaries

The metaphor of the dictionary defines one mode of taxonomy. However, instead of a word and its definition, the dictionary of gestures provides a movement and its function. The layout of such dictionaries combines an image or photograph alongside a description of a movement and it stands as an enumeration of movements that become fettered together through their possibility for interaction: a selection of movements and their programmes.

Apple, most notably, presents a dictionary of gestures for their devices which "elicit a close personal connection with content and enhance the sense of direct manipulation of onscreen objects" (Apple Inc. n.d.). They present an animated and comprehensive dictionary where each entry includes a gesture and its function. For example: "Tap. Activates a control or selects an item" (fig 1). Notably in this dictionary is there is no "body", only a yellow indicator that displays how the interaction should be conducted. The yellow indicator (as replicated in Figure 1) demonstrates how these gestures are to be performed reducing the gesture to pure movement.

Such phonic gestures are not exclusive to Apple devices. Designer Luke Wroblewski provides a "Touch Gesture Reference Guide" (Villamor *et al.* 2010). This taxonomy demonstrates how the assumedly ubiquitous "tap" is platform dependent on how it is described. But it is important to note that within such dictionaries, it is movement being described as interaction; the desire to approach the device with the dexterity of the fingers, to elicit the "close personal relationship" Apple discussed.

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[5] The word "Cartesianism" is used here to illustrate a mind-body dualism. "New digital Cartesianism" became pervasive in the mid-1990s with a wide growth of immersive technologies and early experiments on this front. The body's responsibility in computing was that of the mid-peripheral between the "mind" and the hardware. For some, VR and associated immersive technologies were seen as a means to dissolve mind-body dualism (or inner and outer extensity and intensity) of Cartesianism (notably in the work of early VR adopters such as Char Davis), while others would argue that the apparatus reinforces it. A solid primer for understanding early conceptualisations of VR is Alan Wexelblat's *Virtual Reality* (1992).
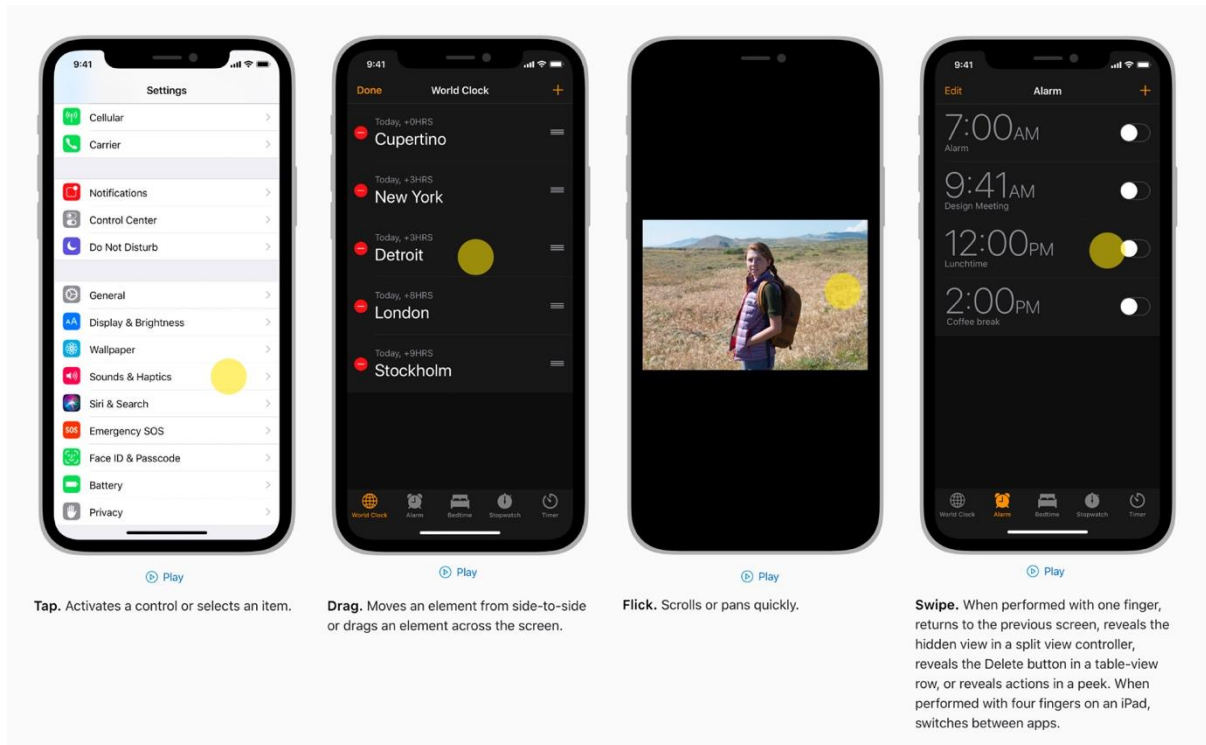
Figure 1: An example of a gestural dictionary (Apple Inc. n.d.)

Another such dictionary is found in the text *Designing Gestural Interfaces* (2009). This dictionary does not define movements but instead presents a complete taxonomy of *possible* bodily movements and *possible* uses. It appears to be asking how much closer the body can get to the apparatus and what further transformations are possible. The text concludes with a "gestural palette" that is presented to the reader: 254 photographs demonstrating movements of the body. Each photo is accompanied by a title ("Nose Wrinkle"), a description ("The nose is pulled upward in distaste or disgust, causing the brow and the top of the nose to furrow"), and a possible use for the demonstrated movement ("Triggering help" [Saffer 2009: 209, Figure 2]). Every movement of the body becomes a possible interactive gesture, and the body becomes described by the apparatus completely and therefore an extension thereof.
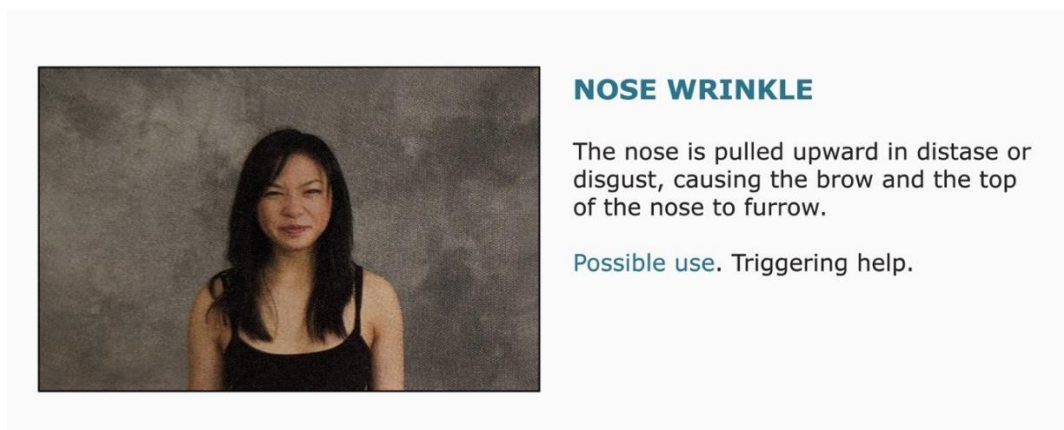

Figure 2: An example from the gestural palette presented in Saffer's *Designing Gestural Interfaces*.

What is revealed in this dictionary is not an attempt to define the body and its movements, but to look at the body's weights and levers, limbs and joints reduced into technical image. There is palatable anxiety in the gallery of images as each biomechanical possibility of the body is provided with a use to interact with the apparatus; begging the question if it is the movement or the apparatus which came to exist first. Perhaps most troubling within this palette of gestures is how the body's reduction to pure gesture is a reduction to technical image; the body is made "neutral" in the face of the apparatus as these "'premade' gestures are easy to learn and use" (Saffer 2009: 179). There is a change here as the body is no longer using the device. Instead, the body is presented as a site through which further functionality is made possible.

Gestural taxonomies: notations

While the dictionary taxonomies have seen various uses in attempts to understand gestures, there is also the rise and adaptation of various abstract notations of the body. These notations have a lengthy history in attempting to understand the gestures of the body. The school of gesture known as kinesics founded by Ray Birdwhistell developed a propaedeutic notation transcribed with a collection of mathematical symbols (such as "bb ΛV" or "// $\frac{bb1}{o}$ //" (Birdwhistell 1978: 291)). Linguist Adam Kendon developed a notation for gestures in *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (2013) where gestures are broken into tildes (~), asterisk (*) and dash/point combinations (-.-). However, it is the Laban Movement System (Labanotation) that has become central within discussions surrounding gestural interfaces.

Labanotation was developed in the discipline of dance and theatre in an attempt to create a movement notation to both record and produce movements of the body. There is not enough scope to fully describe this notation here, but it can be demonstrated how it dissects the body into discrete parts and discrete sections and discrete positions. Each symbol is accompanied by levels of movement (low, middle, and high), and they are placed along three staffs that are read from the base upwards: oftentimes to a count. The notations can be made incredible complex as it accounts not only for movements and gestures but also how they traverse both space and time (see Figure 3).

Labanotation was eagerly adopted to record the body's motions as its "syntactical structure allows for the development of software that can automatically perform… movement analysis and recording" (Kahol *et al.* 2006: 38). It has become a common modality for recording the body's movements (see Hachimura and Nakamura 2001; Hattori and Takamori 2002) and capturing the

bodies movements in software (Kordts *et al.* 2015). Yet within writing on Labanotation and computer interactions, there does appear to be an underlying tension as the notation is dismissed as being ineffectual. For example, several "of these existing notation systems are far too complex for use in documenting interfaces… [but] there are some things we can extract from their methodologies" (Saffer 2009: 92). Or, as Kahol *et al.* argue, there is a requirement for systems that are "more advanced and intuitive than Labanotation" insofar as individuals develop a personal gestural vocabulary (2006: 37).
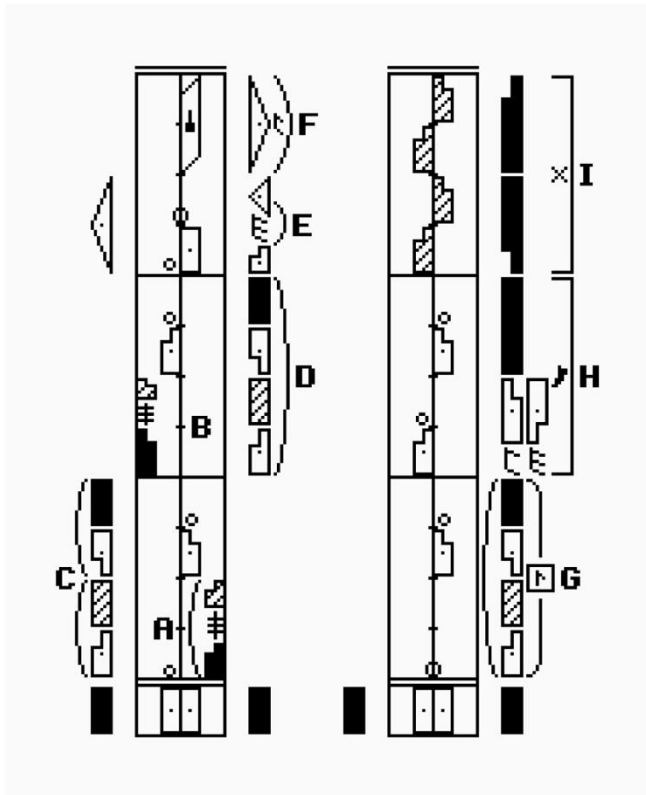

Figure 3: An example of Labanotation (Griesbeck 1996).

It becomes clear that Labanotation—and other similar notation systems—are not used within the discipline, but instead are presented as evidence that these gestures *can* be notated abstractly. Within HCI, other notations have also found parlance. Besides the Laban Movement system, the Benesh System developed by Rudolf Benesh and Joan Benesh, the Eshkol Wachman Movement Notation (EWMN) developed by Noa Eshkol and Avraham Wachman are presented as examples of how to notate the movements of the body. However, in each instance the notations are never successful as such notations produce technical images with the promise of more advanced technical images: a higher resolution mosaic for use of (and creation by) the apparatus. However, it is not an issue

with notation in terms of style or symbols, rather the very act of notating itself is what undermines this project if a complete conceptualisation of gestures is to be attained.

Gestural taxonomies: limitations

As shown, the developing gestural language of today has been examined and explicated through various taxonomies: a parade of dictionaries and abstract notations. However, there are several issues at the heart of such methods that will never allow for a complete understanding of these gestures. There are three central issues worth mentioning before demonstrating how a Flusserian gestural analysis can account for these limitations.

First, these taxonomies do not result in new knowledge of gesture, but instead, create a series of technical images.[6] These technical images of gesture limit the potential of movement in how devices are used. The methods of use aspire to be both correct and natural and the "discipline" behind these movements becomes a discipline with two meanings. On the one hand, a discipline as in a branch of knowledge as these technical images present a selection of codes and programmes of how the body should be understood. Codes and programmes in a Flusserian sense as presented in his work on photography that accounts for both the technical limitations of the (body) apparatus but also the wider social context of these movements. On the other hand, these taxonomies allude to a discipline in a stricter Foucauldian sense, that is, a method of limiting the possibilities of the body insofar as the amalgam of swipes, taps, and pinches are presented like that of the "good handwriting" model of *Discipline and Punish*, which shows "a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger" (Foucault 1977: 152). The technical image creates a multifaceted discipline of gesture that arguably limits the fullness of a body's potential.

Second, this limitation of the body's potential is not exclusive to discipline but also presented in the very definition of *"body"* typified within these dictionaries and notations. This body is defined as natural and expected, and therefore dangerous; as it is not often decided *whose* body is being described within these taxonomies. Is it the taxonamised body gendered? Is the body able, and, if so, able by whose definition? In reducing the body to biomechanics, it can never be anything other than biomechanics and the possibility of a more complex and, arguably, inclusive gestural vocabulary collapse. This therefore creates a limited methodology for understanding gestures to the point where the body can be removed entirely (such as Apple's yellow dot). This has caused

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[6] Another fascinating discussion on the body made technical image can be found in Agamben's treatise, "Notes on Gesture" (2000) where he looks at cinema as a return to gesture. Several echoes can be found in Agamben's and Flusser's theories of gesture, but these discussions are beyond the scope of this paper.

many to revisit the central methodological tenets of Negroponte and Jobs insofar as the body, put simply, is not natural (Mauss 1973; Norman 2010). Once the body is "seen as levers and weights [it] can be explained only by the deterministic laws of mechanics" (Larsen *et al.* 2005: 2) and political determinants of these movements fail to find purchase.

Third, these taxonomies do not account for gesture as phenomena. The rise of technical images and the abstract neutrality of the body has promoted a representation of gestures as being discrete entitles that all occur in absence of one another. However, when considered together these enumerating and discrete taxonomies collapse into a series of gestures that exist along a threshold in relation to one another, and this threshold is experiential and therefore phenomena. While a taxonomy is capable of demonstrating a gestural functionality or operation, these taxonomies cannot account for the threshold between gestures. Taxonomies become the consideration of a language of verbs in spite of its mortar. Flusser's gestural theory is not a dismissal of taxonomy. In fact, he presents considerations of classification within the text's appendix (164-171) however writes that classifications "comes with the proviso that… no actual gesture belongs entirely in any" category. A theory of gestural categorisation is possible but this structure requires the acknowledgement of phenomena first. Flusser's work on gesture is a writing of this threshold is a description of phenomena.

Flusser's writing on gesture

Flusser's writing on gesture spanned the length of his career and was published as a collected volume just months before his death in 1991. The volume—*Gestures*—is not a complete treatise on gesture: instead, the ordered and selected essays seem to outline why a new theory of gesture has become required within the humanities. In the opening essay, "Gestures and Affects: The Practice of a Phenomenology of Gestures", Flusser contends that the inadequacy of existing theories of gestures is that they are incomplete insofar as they commit to a misguided reduction of gesture: a reduction into body, not a reduction of the body in terms of phenomena.

The volume then becomes an explication on what Flusser deems the "non-causal" explanation of gestures. While existing theories of gesture delineate some of the causal impetus behind such movements, Flusser is concerned with the non-causal. As he writes: "If I raise my arm, and someone tells me that the movement is the result of physical, physiological, social, economic, cultural, and whatever other causes, I would accept [their] explanation. But I would not be satisfied" (2014: 1-2). In other words, gestures cannot be defined by their causal motivations, and the non-causal dynamics require a place in any unified theory of gesture.

What are the non-causal elements of a gesture? Flusser is not clear and defines it as a "state of mind" that is expressed and articulated through movements of the body. It is possible to understand this "state of mind" as affect, however, this does not add much clarity as little is done to conceptualise this term either (2014: 4-5)[7]. While such a definition is difficult to grasp (as Flusser himself concedes), the work's translator, Nancy Ann Roth, writes in the edition's preface that the volume does not completely explicate a final meaning of the term *gesture*, and rather the "essays tend to spiral in on the meaning of gesture from many different angles" (Roth 2014a: x). This spiralling-in is part and parcel of how Flusser wishes gesture to be conceived. It is no surprise, then, that certain parallels emerge between his thinking around gesture and his work on translation. For Flusser, it could be asserted, gesture is a means of translating a "state of mind" into a movement of the body; however not in a way that promotes any dualistic Cartesianism, but rather one that acknowledges the inseparable threshold between these two aspects of a subject. As his work around translation forwards "the translator is forced to move on continuously, striving at the same time to get back to the origin only to discover that there is no possibility [as m]eaning is homeless and itinerant" (Finger *et al.* 2011: 29). Reading gesture then as a means of translation is how it can be read without causation. Not as an act of intention or a manifestation of state of mind, but a translation of state of mind into phenomena.

Principally, the gestures described in Flusser's essays seldom belong to an individual. As much as a gesture is the action of an individual (a user taps a screen), this gesture is also available to be experienced by others (this tapping can be seen). Therefore, gesture becomes triangulated between various points. He discusses this at length in his essays on the gesture of painting (2014: 63), the gesture of photography (2014: 74), and the gesture of turning the mask around (2014: 96) and the observer becomes central to his framework for understanding gesture. This in itself is further evidence of gesture-as-phenomena as it is action-seen, not exclusively action-performed. Furthermore, this visibility of gesture is not exclusive to being seen by others, as a gesture is also witnessed by the person executing the movements (the gesture of shaving (108), and photography again (84)). Plausibly, Flusser's theory is a theory of Flusser's own gestures as in many instances it is his own gestures he is witnessing.

What is key to notice about this witnessing is that it situates a user within a context as lines are formed between various individuals during these excursions of the body. This placing or situating is a second key element of a Flusserian gestural analysis. A gesture is never neutral and could

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[7] The English translation discusses use of the word affect in the text (Roth 2014b: 177-178). In Flusser's original the word *Gestimmtheit* was used, and he used the English "Sentimentality" within his translation. However, the term affect was plausibly decided upon as "it unites the sense of an internal experience with its external, observable manifestation" (Roth 2014b: 178). Affect as a term has also fallen under considerable critical scrutiny since what Patricia Clough called the "affective turn" (see Clough 2008), however for the purposes of this research affect can be understood as the relationship between state-of-mind and its observable manifestations.

thus never be the exercise of biomechanical weights and levers. Rather, it is all an expression of a situation and thus this situation is incorporated—translated—into these gestures. To clarify, the situation is not what causes a gesture as the situation itself is defined in terms of the gestures which occur with it. The gesture and the situation it translates are one and the same; not discrete elements, but rather various accretions of a contiguous phenomenon. Consider how he discusses his smoking attire in his gesture of smoking a pipe (2014: 118) and the reliance of pockets which contain the menagerie of items that allow for this situating. However, as he continues, this situating that invites the gesture could be explained "historically… sociologically, and perhaps work with such concepts as 'social level' or 'cultural level'" (119), but once again such explanations are casual and do not produce this gesture. Rather this situating is more affecting than effecting, more potential than causing: it is the situating of an origin from which the translation begins. A situation through which the subject acts themselves out.

Roth extrapolates upon this in her essay, "Towards a Phenomenology of Gestures" (2015), and extends how the "quirky, banal, perhaps not entirely deliberate features of an individual's be-haviour are worth serious consideration" (Roth 2015: 68). Flusser's gesture-theory in this regard emerges as an examination of the relationship between situatedness and being seen; these less ex-pressive movements (not the verb of pipe smoking, but the mortar of storing tobacco in a pocket) all consolidate across a threshold through which an individual acts themselves out as a moment of gestural ipseity if uncovered through these various movements. The word "act" here not being used in the sense of performance, but in the sense of performative as this acting-out is a means of translating the situation and thus implicitly tied to it. In short, the gesture is not causal of a situation but constituent of a situation.

Therefore, in parsing Flusser's theory of gesture into a heuristic it would be arranged and assembled as a phenomenon that shares three points. First, it is situated within a context that is neither historical nor sociological but of the gesture itself; second, it is never a discrete moment as it unfolds over time and develops through a variety of movements over a threshold; third, it is witnessed by others who are therefore drawn into the situation (and who inevitable proceed to gesture). These three points are assembled through a translation: not from one position to the next, but all in effect of one another. This, ultimately, is also why Flusser requires his general theory of gestures to be described as "a means of orienting ourselves in the circumstances in which we find ourselves in respect to things and people" (Flusser 2014: 161).

Arguably, that what is being translated, witnessed and (re)situated is a postdigital condition.

The postdigital condition

Theories of the postdigital emerged at the break of the new millennium as a response to Negroponte's statement that "the Digital Revolution is over" (1998). This statement was met with some debate and confusion (Cascone 2000; Alexenberg 2011; Cramer 2015), as it appeared that the cultural, structural and political shifts of digitalization were just beginning to take effect. Regardless of the specifics of these debates, this influential statement made by Negroponte led to a parade of investigations and research into what can loosely be classified as a postdigital condition. Following this, a variety of texts, essays and exhibitions have attempted to define the postdigital, but to understand how gestures translate the postdigital condition into phenomena, there are at least three aspects of the postdigital which require acknowledgement.

First, the *post-* in postdigital does not denote a coming after but rather should be understood as being *in effect of* or *adjacent to* the digital. This has led to this prefix being subject to repeated criticisms as Cramer argues that the post in postdigital does place the term in "the dubious company of other historico-philosophical 'post'-isms, from postmodernism to post-histoire" (2015: 14), the *post-* within postdigital needs to be defined more pragmatically; an argument extended by Geoff Cox elsewhere (2014). The structures, apparatuses, and assemblages that are navigated by individuals today are all seemingly underpinned or underlined by the "digital". This has led to the rhetoric of digital ubiquity that has pervaded discussion surrounding the digital and expressed in debates around the IoT, metaphors of diaphanous cloud-computing, and being always online (see Hu 2015 for an extensive examination of this metaphor). Within postdigital explorations metaphors such as the veil (Cascone 2000) or the membrane what (Pepperell & Punt 2000) are often called upon to illustrate this ubiquity.

Second, the "digital" within the postdigital is not exclusively a technology or a word used in terms of software or code. Instead, the postdigital can be said to comprise of a series of digital "programmes". That is to use the term in the Flusserian sense that should "first be understood on a basic technological level… [but extended to include] the broader cultural context of the present-day" (van der Meulen 2010: 193). What this means is that the digital is not socially nor politically neutral and the post-racial and post-gendered democratising potential of centralised digital technologies is by and large a myth (as discussed at length in the works of Lisa Nakamura 2007 and Ruha Benjamin 2019, for example). The digital, in short, is widely ideological and thus is not a bastion of efficacy, sterile correctness and competency. Rather, it is replete with glitches and

dropped connections that reveal its inherent limitations. Thus, digital gestures require sophisticated, critical analysis that cannot be discrete explorations of the functionality of biometric weights and levers.

Thirdly, the postdigital is a return to the body's role within the digital and its relationship to how it is accessed, interacted with and engaged with; how the digital is gestured towards and an examination of how these gestures both interpellates the digital towards the subject and simultaneously limits a complete union with it. This is by and large a response to the first two assumptions by understanding that the ubiquity of the digital is largely rhetorical (as mentioned in point one) and the digital is not politically neutral (as mentioned in point two). It becomes beholden on authors of the postdigital to return to the body or bodies that are engaging with the digital. It is not a return to the body in a Cartesian or biomechanical sense as illustrated by the technical images of the body above, but rather it is a return to a seeing or witnessing of the body as a subject expressed through the postdigital condition.

These three aspects are the three central methodological tenets upon which discussions of postdigital gestures should be had. In summary, a postdigital gesture needs to be understood as three things: it is a digital gesture whether it engages with digital technologies or not, it is not a neutral gesture as it is coerced by Flusserian programmes that are not neutral, and lastly, it is concerned with a bodily expression of this situation. Ultimately, gestures today—to borrow Flusser's words—are an expression and articulation of this postdigital condition. Insofar as gestures emerge from within this postdigital condition, the gesturing will always operate as a translation of the condition and these movements can never be understood as existing outside of it. Therefore, when using a Flusserian method for analysing gesture, it is redolent that each of these aspects of the postdigital are considered as the situating home from where any translation begins. The body's movements cannot be reduced to technical images that denote an interaction or functionality; rather the body's phenomena should be considered as a production of (post)digital engagement that is neither exclusively comprised of verbs nor mortar but the threshold between these two modes of movement.

To demonstrate a Flusserian analysis of postdigital gesturality, presented below is a close critical reading of Luke Collins' short film *Swiped* (2019).

Close analysis of *Swiped*

Collins' *Swiped* is a film about gestures and their relation to the digital. However, it is not about how gestures function, instead, it is a film about how the distinction between the gesture, the digital and individual interactions are no longer realised as discrete. There is no distinction in the film

between verbs and mortar. What is instead presented is a world defined by gestures; a complete gestural diegesis.

The narrative is about two individuals (Ashleigh and Tom) in what appears to be a restaurant. As the conversation progresses it becomes apparent that the restaurant itself is not a physical—brick and mortar—institution, and rather a digital space shared by the two individuals. The two are immersed there, and this becomes a keen metaphor for the postdigital: apparently complete digital ubiquity.

The world they inhabit is not imaginary, but digitally generated and there is evidence of this in at least three instances through a variety of glitches that pierce the space. First, the drinks have no taste (as noted by Ashleigh) as the "technology" is not perfect (as noted by Tom). Second, there is a lapse in (assumedly) network connectivity as an exasperated Tom is frustrated as Ashleigh disappears for a moment. Lastly, there is the moment of "buffering" which is indicated over Ashleigh's eye by a common icon (Figure 4). What these indicate is that the world seen by viewers is not phantasy: it is digital and it is material, and demonstrated as such through these glitches. Ashleigh and Tom are elsewhere, but only seen inhabiting a digital position in relation to one another. The digital world is a digital ubiquity in this instance: at first not recognisable as such, but once recognised (through a series of glitches), it becomes apparent it is everything. It is a depiction of what Pepperell and Punt refer to as the membrane (2000) or Cascone calls the "previous impenetrable veil" (2000: 12) of the digital.
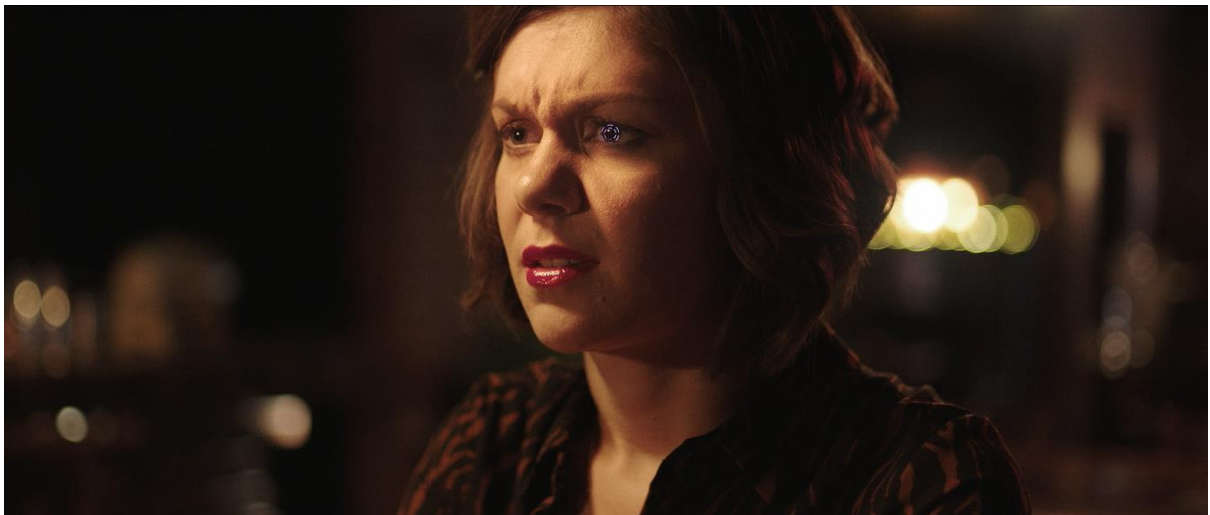

Figure 4: A buffering icon appears over Ashleigh's eye.

The digital then, in being everything, no longer exists as a point of focus insofar as its ubiquity (rhetorical or not) makes it near meaningless. What remains and is present is how the digital is not actualised in its appearance (a bar inhabited by people), but it is actualised through various gestures.

From the first moment, hands become important in the narrative as Ashleigh is shown tactically playing with a napkin. She grasps it, tugs it and comprehends through a process of discovery. The gestures of her hands here are not functionary or interactive—these are not verbs of use—but they become part of an embodying process in which she embodies her pervasive digital surrounding. Her tugging would be referred to as a gesture of "making" by Flusser, yet what she is being made is not artistic creation, but a space for herself in this (postdigital) world.

When Tom enters, the movements of the hands become rapid and continuous. Gestures are made, hands are hidden beneath the table and there is a repeated process of showing and hiding between the two reinforcing how important the hands are within this space. But it is only a few minutes in when a verb is demonstrated and made visible by the audience. Tom begins his excursion by raising his hand. He directs two fingers towards a beverage and with a dismissive, phonic swipe the beverage switches.

The key here is that the primary swipe gesture is the first gesture of use, but the two individuals have been interacting with each other through their gestures beforehand. The postdigital is being translated. It is not gestures that are directly tied to a specific intent, but instead gesture as phenomena of embodiment within the digital. Gestures are what are used by the two to translate themselves into this space and inhabit that space fully.

The film does demonstrate how these movements are not perfect. As remarked by Tom, the "technology" is not quite there yet. But there is still a specific performance that occurs to make their position more authentic. They sit apart from one another, order several drinks, and proceed to imbibe although the drinks are tasteless. The drinks are not completely perceptual, and only present them with the possibility of perception. But the gesture of raising the hand to the glass, bringing the glass to the face, and sipping the tasteless beverage is still completed. It becomes more important that the gestures are seen than promote functionality. Wherefore, gestures become a threshold and this is a second key point in the film: there are two people. Flusser incessantly repeats that gestures occur between multiple individuals and the drinks between Ashleigh and Tom are not drinks to be shared, but gestures to be seen and therefore an acknowledgement of the threshold between various lines that converge on a single gesture. The gesture that is created in drinking is the gesture of conviviality between two people and not a moment of quenching thirst.

Therefore, there are two modes or strata of gestures overlapping each other. The primary gestures of interaction (swiping, *et al*) and the secondary gestures of embodied presence (tugging a napkin, sipping a tasteless drink) are not separate modes of gesturality but become imbricated in a continuous and productive gesturing towards a wider (post)digital. The individuals need to control the digital, direct it, swipe through drinks and people; but simultaneously then need to completely

inhabit it pull, touch, sip, snort, talk and so on. These cannot be seen as separate modes of gesture, but simultaneous and related translations of the digital into an embodied postdigital condition.

And what is not seen: where Tom and Ashleigh are outside of this gestural diegetic. The restaurant is hyperdiegetic and they exist beyond it (possibly using some form of immersive apparatus). But this space is not required and not important because even though they cannot present themselves in "person", they can present their gestures and that in and of itself is comprehensive.

Conclusion

Ashleigh and Tom's gestures could never be comprehensively taxonomised insofar as they belong to Ashleigh and Tom and are witnessed and situated as phenomena of a postdigital condition. They do not exist beyond their gestures, and their gestures are a translation of a postdigital condition. It is for this reason that Tom can so dismissively swipe not only the selection of cocktails but also Ashleigh and various other women; until he is inevitably swiped away himself.

Flusser's work opens gesture beyond the biomechanical into a witnessed situating. It is not being argued here that these gestures are particularly postdigital, but that they cannot be read outside of the postdigital and are therefore defined as such. They are both phenomena and situated movements.

In conclusion, this paper has examined the developing gestural language and how it has come to be examined today. It has shown that while taxonomies could perhaps demonstrate a functionality they cannot account for the complex set of (postdigital) programmes translated in the way that gestures develop today. Flusser's work on gesture therefore becomes a prerequisite for any theory on gesture as it accounts for not only causes of biomechanical movements but also how gestures are situated, witnessed and created as phenomena. And ultimately, his work is not a taxonomy itself, but rather a heuristic through which the postdigital gestures of today can be translated.

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